

John Forsyth

(22 Oct 1780 – 24 Oct 1841)

Biographical Director of the United States Congress 1774-1989

A Representative and a Senator from Georgia; born in Fredericksburg, Va., October 22, 1780; was graduated from Princeton College in 1799; moved to Augusta, Georgia with his father; studied law; was admitted to the bar in 1802 and commenced practice in Augusta; elected attorney general of Georgia in 1808; elected as a Democrat to the 13th through 15th Congresses and served from March 4, 1813, until his resignation, effective November 23, 1818; elected to the United States Senate on November 7, 1818, to fill the vacancy caused by the resignation of George M. Troup, and served from November 23, 1818, to February 17, 1819 when he resigned to accept an appointment as Minister to Spain, serving in that capacity until March 2, 1823; elected to the 18th and 20th Congresses and served from March 4, 1823, until his resignation, effective November 7, 1827; Governor of Georgia 1827-1829; again elected to the United States Senate to fill the vacancy caused by the resignation of John Macpherson Berrien and served from November 9, 1829, to June 27, 1834, when he resigned to accept a Cabinet portfolio; appointed by president Van Buren and served from July 1, 1834, to March 4, 1841; died in Washington, D.C., October 21, 1841; interment in Congressional Cemetery.

The National Intelligencer, Saturday, October 23, 1841

Death of Mr. Forsyth

In another column our readers will perceive, many of them with deep regret, none of them with indifference, the annunciation of the death of the late Hon. John Forsyth, of Georgia, late Secretary of State. He died at his residence in this city on Thursday evening, of congestive fever, after an illness of three or four weeks. To pronounce the eulogy due to the public character of this distinguished gentleman is a duty that does not devolve on us; but it is not fitting that we, who knew the deceased so long as a public man, should withhold from his memory the justice of saying that he possessed qualities which placed him much above the level of the mass of mankind. The high offices which, during so great a portion of his life, he successively filled, both in his own particular State and in the National Government, attest at once the superiority of his abilities and the public estimation of them. To the high advantage of superior talents he added, also, that of an elegance and dignity of manners which shed a grace on the exalted stations which he filled. His death, sundering many ties of devoted affection, has plunged in the deepest distress a large and most interesting domestic circle.

The National Intelligencer, Monday, October 25, 1841

The Funeral of the Hon. John Forsyth, which took place in this city on Saturday, was attended by the Representatives of Foreign Governments now in Washington, by the Heads of our Executive Departments, the General-in-Chief of the Army, and many other officers of the Government, and military, as well as many private citizens. The religious services were conducted by the Rev. Mr. Hawley and the Rev. Mr. Butler, of the Episcopal Church.

The National Intelligencer, October 28, 1841

The Hon. John Forsyth

Mors sola fatetur

Quantula sint hominum corpuscula.

Again the insatiate Archer has sped his unerring dart, and another distinguished victim has fallen beneath his fatal shaft. Each day's revolution illustrates the solemn truth that man is dust, and to dust he must return. The most exalted as well as the most lowly are alike subject to the inevitable decree which has gone forth from the throne of Omnipotence; and, whether he moves in the humblest walks of life, or revolves in the highest and most brilliant circles of society, the grave awaits him; and from that last resting place of man there is no escape. The most inordinate ambition and the lowliest aspirations--the most illustrious actions, as well as the most obscure and humble efforts--all tend to the same end--all await the inevitable hour that closes forever the changeful drama of life.

"The paths of glory lead but to the grave."

But what, at last, are the most splendid efforts of successful ambition? What all the distinction that rank, or fame, or wealth can bestow? The mere avarice of air--the brilliant dreams of a few fleeting moments--the delusive ignes fatui of life--all ending in the awful reality of death, and demonstrating, in the language of Pindar, that "we are shadows, and the dreams of shadows are all our fancies imagine." Where are now the illustrious Egyptians who figured on the stage of life two thousand years ago, who erected pyramids whose "Mass indestructible a fatigue le tems," and who caused their bodies to be embalmed that they might be preserved till their immortal spirits should again return to reanimate them? Sir Thomas Brown has told their history in a few words: "Mummy has become merchandise; Mizraim cures wounds, and Pharaoh is sold for balsam."

It was about 27 years ago that I first saw the distinguished individual whose name heads this article. What changes, what revolutions have occurred, and what myriad's have passed away from the stage of life and sunk into the oblivion of the grave, since then! I was standing in the gallery of the House of Representatives when Mr. F. rose to address that body. It was his first parliamentary effort, and I listened, like all present, with deep interest to the speech he then delivered. He was in the thirty-fourth year of his age, with a countenance of great beauty and benignity, and a figure well proportioned and graceful. His eye was blue, soft, and expressive, his complexion fair, his features regular, and his hair light and glossy. His fine talents and agreeable manners gave him at once a prominent stand in the body to which he belonged that he always retained, and he rose rapidly in the estimation of his countrymen. He was then unhackneyed in the tortuous ways of the politician, and had all the warmth and nobleness of heart which belong to the South. He stood forth the bold and ardent defender of his country, and the eloquent advocate and supporter of the republican principles he had embraced.

In 1817 the following sketch of Mr. Forsyth was written and published in a work entitled "Letters from Washington:"*

"Mr. Forsyth has, like most of the members of the American Congress, been educated for the bar, at which he has practiced for some years with considerable success. He received the rudiments of his education in the seminary of which Mr. Crawford (afterwards Secretary of the Treasury) acted as usher, and completed it at Princeton. He first distinguished himself in a case of impeachment, instituted by the Legislature of Georgia against the commissioners employed to dispose of some public lands belonging to the State. On this occasion, though but a stripling, he displayed much ability, and acquired no little reputation. It was the means of making him known through his adopted State, (being a native of Fredericksburg, Virginia,) and of bringing him into public life as a member of the great National Council. The practice of the law has, therefore, for the present, been relinquished either from necessity or inclination. Legislation, however, seems to be better adapted to his habits and feelings, and it is scarcely probable he will ever return to his profession, if he should be so fortunate as to succeed in the difficult and arduous duties of a legislator and statesman in which he is now engaged. I think Mr. F. has ambition, and is solicitous to render himself conspicuous in political life. His talents are of no ordinary character, and, were he to devote more of his time to the improvement of his mind and the acquisition of that various and general knowledge so essential to a statesman, he would have few or no superiors in this country. He is a brilliant and sometimes an eloquent speaker. His voice is harmonious and

susceptible of great modulation, but not sonorous or powerful. He wants impetuosity and vehemence, but supplies this deficiency by a constant, regular, and uninterrupted flow, which resembles a stream where no rocks arise or projections intervene to disturb the gentle motion of its current. His style is not figurative or ornate, but sufficiently flowing and oratorical to gratify the ear and please the mind. He is, however, more of a debater than an orator; his elocution flows, but never gushes, his phraseology is sometimes tastefully selected and arranged, and his arguments ingenious and plausible, if not always conclusive. He possesses the "dazzling power of argument," though he wants the epigrammatic point and graceful antithesis which are observable in Grattan and the Irish orators," etc.

This sketch requires little alteration. Time and experience matured his faculties, and his enlarged knowledge of mankind gave him greater power over the workings of the human heart. As a debater few excelled him. He was always prepared; prompt, ready, courteous, and gentlemanly. His keenest shafts were dipped in rose water and never rankled. A smile irradiated his countenance even when his retorts were tinged with bitterness, and his opponent was constrained to admire his courtesy while he felt the force of his blow. Mr. Forsyth continued in public life till a few months before his death. He passed successively through the high stations of Member of the House of Representatives, Senator of the United States, Minister to Spain, Governor of Georgia, and Secretary of State, in all of which he displayed the splendid talents with which he had been endowed, and exercised his faculties for the welfare and glory of his country. Though devoted to party, he was not blinded to the merits of those who opposed his political tenets, and though often exposed to the battery of the press, and denounced and condemned for the opinions he entertained, and the measures he supported, he suffered no feeling of hatred or animosity to disturb the tranquility of his mind, or to embitter his intercourse with his fellow-man. In the social circle, he was not less conspicuous for the ease, grace, and suavity of his manners and the amiableness of his disposition. He could be familiar without being undignified, and reserved without being offensive. He was always self-composed, and always at his ease. It was but rare that anything had power to disturb the apparent serenity of his mind, or to throw into agitation the habitual placidity of his temper. He could be roused at times, however, and then his indignation was not easily subdued. At personal or national insult he felt deeply; and he manifested that feeling both in his language and manner, but it was an ebullition which reason as well as virtue would justify. Mr. Forsyth has filled a considerable space in the public eye for the last quarter of a century. His career has been a brilliant and useful one. He has occupied elevated stations through life, and has rendered important services to his country--and he has sunk into the silent tomb covered with honors. Fortune and his own merits had placed him where the high gifts with which his Maker had endowed him might be employed in promoting the glory and welfare of his country; and it cannot be said that he did not employ them successfully to that end. He has won a niche in the temple of immortality, and secured a page in the history of the Republic. He has now passed away forever from the fitful scenes, the toils and agitation's of life, and sleeps, with those who have gone before him, the long deep sleep of death. Could a voice from the tomb be heard, what would be his language now?

"Ye lying vanities of life!

"Ye ever-tempting, ever-cheating train!

"Where are ye now? And what is your amount?"

*Letters from Washington on the Constitution and Laws of the U.S. etc. by G. Watterston.